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Russia’s Evolving Grand Eurasia Strategy: Will It Work?

Dmitri Trenin
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Summary: While Russia repositions itself as a stand-alone power in the north-central portion of the world’s largest continent, its leaders are seeking to create a distinct national entity amid a vast and highly diverse neighborhood.

With a shift in strategy, 2014 was a pivotal year for Russia’s foreign policy. It was then that Moscow began moving away from its traditional focus on Europe and the Atlantic, with secondary attention to the former Soviet borderlands. The Ukraine crisis served as the coup de grâce for the two concepts that had guided Russian foreign policy since the break-up of the Soviet Union: integration into the wider West and reintegration of the former republics with Russia. What is now emerging is not so much a Russian pivot to Asia or more precisely to China, as many commentators trumpeted immediately after the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, but rather a 360-degree vision, where Moscow serves as the central element of a new geopolitical construct: Eurasia writ large. While Russia repositions itself as a stand-alone power in the north-central portion of the world’s largest continent, its leaders are seeking to create a distinct national entity amid a vast and highly diverse neighborhood. The country’s new geopolitical framework is being referred to as Greater Eurasia.

Commonly, Eurasia consists of the lands that lie between what is undeniably Europe and what is clearly Asia—roughly the territory long occupied by the Russian Empire (except Poland and Finland) and then by the Soviet Union (except for the Baltic republics). Greater Eurasia now embraces the entire landmass of the world’s largest continent, from Korea to Portugal and from the Arctic to the Indian Ocean. Of course, this has always been Russia’s geopolitical setting. President Vladimir Putin was pushing concepts such as a “Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok” as early as 2010. The difference today is that Russia’s long affiliation with its historical empire is gone, along with the country’s more recent European aspirations.

Because this new geopolitical set of references calls for an entirely different strategy, Russian policy planners have found themselves back at the drawing board. Even after Putin’s announcement of the Greater Eurasia project in June 2016, the actual policy concept is still in gestation. However, its building blocks are already visible: the self-image of a lone, great power in a global world; outreach to Asian partners to create a continental order free from the dominance of the United States; and calculated patience toward Western Europe. Will this grand Eurasia strategy bear fruit or fail in the same way as previous strategies?

Russia’s Strategic Failures

Integration With the West

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Moscow’s principal foreign policy objective was to join the West, as an integral player in Greater Europe and a major ally of the United States. Russian leaders achieved accession to the Council of Europe (1996), the G7 (1997), and the World Trade Organization

(2012). They sought membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and even considered joining the EU. Essentially, Moscow was seeking a higher status within the West, which would allow its full participation in all decisionmaking alongside Washington. This was not to be. Russia was offered partnership but no special privileges and no role in Western decisionmaking. Moscow's refusal to accept U.S. leadership was the primary cause of the estrangement between Russia and the United States that has been growing since 1999 (the Kosovo crisis) and particularly since 2003 and 2004 (the Iraq War and Ukraine's Orange Revolution). A decade later, it took a much more severe crisis in Ukraine for Russia and the United States to move beyond what had become a partnership in name only toward overt confrontation.

Renewal of the U.S.-Russia rivalry, as well as Europe's concerns and fears over Russia's use of force and the border changes, led to the current deep estrangement between Russia and countries of the EU. Despite rather strong economic links, cultural affinities, and human exchanges, Russia and the rest of Europe clearly parted ways after their unprecedented period of rapprochement following the end of the Cold War. Russia's key relationship with Germany, which Moscow helped to reunify in 1990, became badly broken, and traditional links with France grew cold. Russia's immediate neighbors, the Baltic republics and Poland, saw themselves as vulnerable frontline states; Sweden and Finland turned deeply suspicious; while Ukraine, for centuries part of the core of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, became more hostile toward Moscow than probably any other country in the world.

Reintegration of the Former Republics

The Ukraine crisis in 2014 not only inflamed tensions between Russia and the United States and mutual alienation between Russia and Europe, it simultaneously put an end to Russia's alternative strategy to reintegrate former Soviet republics and restore a Moscow-led power center in the former USSR ("Little Eurasia"). Without Ukraine's population of 45 million, Putin's idea of a comprehensive Eurasian Union lacked critical mass. Moreover, the way Moscow dealt with the crisis in Ukraine raised concerns in Belarus and Kazakhstan, strengthening their leaders' resolve to protect national sovereignty. As a result, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) that was inaugurated in 2015 was essentially economic in nature, with the competences of its supranational structures limited and closely circumscribed. Belarus even thwarted Russia's desire to build an air base in the country. In 2015, the EEU expanded to include Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, but it continues to be little more than a customs union, accounting for only 6 to 7 percent of Russia's foreign trade. Thus, the strategy of building a power center in Little Eurasia by integrating the lands of the former Soviet Union has failed.

A Pivot Toward China

The sudden confrontation with the West in 2014 raised the hopes of Russian political elite that a much closer relationship with China could be sought. By that time, China had already emerged as the principal challenger to the global primacy of the United States, raising expectations that Beijing could replace the West as a source of easy credit, large-scale investment, and advanced technology, as well as a principal market for Russian exports. The calculus was that China would immediately seize the opportunity to help Russia the way the Soviet Union had assisted China after the Communists' civil war victory in 1949.

However, others in Russia feared precisely that outcome and, in particular, that China would come to dominate Russia economically and politically. Rejecting a junior partnership with the United States in order to become a tributary state to China did not look like a great deal. As it turns out, though, their fears were needless. For myriad reasons, China was not interested in a close alliance with Russia, even one it would clearly dominate. Beijing already had much of what it desired from Moscow: energy supplies, military technology, and a stable bulwark in the north. It was also reluctant to expand its involvement in the Russian economy. Chinese leaders likely recoiled at the prospect of managing a Russia that still considered itself a great power. Most significant was China's resolve to avoid exacerbating its increasingly complex relations with the United States by aligning with a country that Washington had just put beyond the pale by means of economic sanctions and attempts at political isolation.

It is worth noting that as a result of Russia's efforts, Sino-Russian relations did become somewhat closer: China gained access to some of Russia's oil and gas fields; the People's Liberation Army received advanced military systems such as the Su-35 fighter and the S-400 air defense system; and Moscow agreed to harmonize the EEU with the Belt and Road (B&R) Initiative. Ultimately, the countries achieved something like an entente, but this fell far short of the strategic relationship Russia had envisioned.

A Marked Departure

In the face of these developments, from the mid-2010s, Russia made a marked shift in its strategic orientation. The risks and pitfalls of turning away from its traditional policies are obvious. Confrontation with the United States and alienation from Western Europe will take an increasingly heavy toll as the years pass. Further, antagonizing a belt of suspicious, unfriendly countries in Central and Eastern Europe has serious security and economic implications for Moscow. The military standoff along Russia's western borders will feed an arms race with NATO. An overtly hostile and irredentist Ukraine is a long-term problem of the first order. As long as the conflict remains unresolved—which may be the case for decades—Russia's and Europe's security will be at risk.

However, if Russia can be creative, a new approach could have tangible benefits. Instead of integrating into a Western-led system or reintegrating recalcitrant ex-provinces, Russia could develop a "global Russia," geared to its own values, interests, and goals. This aversion to formal integration should not spell autarky or isolationism. Russia vitally needs to integrate, but into the global system as a whole, not into tight regional or transregional alignments. Also, rather than simply criticizing U.S. global dominance, Russia would do better to engage with like-minded partners to create an international system that no single power would dominate. The Eurasian continent is about the right size for a successful endeavor—if only Moscow could become smarter in its foreign policy planning and execution.

Toward a Greater Eurasia

Geographically, Russia is well-situated. It stretches all the way from Norway to North Korea. It has a long border with China and relatively easy access to Germany. It connects to Turkey across the Black Sea and to Iran across the Caspian, and India and the Gulf are relatively close. Berlin is only two and a half hours by air from Moscow; and Beijing, Seoul, and Tokyo can be reached even faster from Vladivostok. A continent-size country endowed with rich natural resources and enormous strategic depth, but with a modestly sized population, Russia faces the principal challenge of domestic development. This, rather than foreign mergers or acquisitions, represents an opportunity for Russia to strengthen itself and should be its main focus. Further, Moscow's foreign policy should protect and enhance this development.

The economic dimension of a succesful grand Eurasia strategy would primarily involve harnessing relations with the continent's two principal powerhouses, the EU and China, to help buttress Russia's domestic development. In structural terms, this could involve harmonizing relations between the relatively small Russia-led EEU and the two much bigger economies to the east and the west. Of course, economic relations with the EU will be hampered by the unresolved conflict in Ukraine and entrenched tensions with the United States. Thus, the main geoeconomic focus for the foreseeable future should shift toward the east and south. Eventually, as China's westward economic expansion leads to a more economically connected continent, Europe, China, India, and Russia could become the main pillars of Eurasia's twenty-first century economy.

In this scheme, Russia would aim to be a major producer of high-end energy and metal products, grain, and other food; a source of fresh water and a generator of clean air; and a transit country for land, air, and sea communications. It would remain a significant source of military, nuclear, and space technology and a niche producer in a number of other areas. However, Russia is unlikely to become a leader in advanced technology anytime soon. It would have to spend significant time and energy rebuilding its capacity in science and technological innovation. International economic and technological cooperation, primarily with China and India, but also with Israel and Japan, would be crucial for Russia's future success.

Culturally and ethnically, Russia is both the east of the West and the west of the East. Its official emblem, the double-headed Byzantine eagle, graphically illustrates this. Hence, Russia could be the essential geopolitical swing state, but it should strive to be something else: a moderator and stabilizer in the emerging continental system. Claiming this position would come naturally to the Russians, who have never accepted others' domination or leadership and who have become disillusioned as a result of their own ill-fated attempt at global primacy. Yet, to effectively take this position, they need to learn the art of moderation and prudent deliberation, including among bigger players.

Intellectually, Russia's strategy could take a pragmatic view of international relations, seeking an equilibrium between inevitable competition among the states in Eurasia and their cooperation on the basis of common interest. Particularly important for Moscow would be helping to achieve mutual accommodation between China and India, India and Pakistan, and Afghanistan and Pakistan. In value terms, a successful strategy in

Eurasia would prioritize ideological noninterference and reject cross-border promotion of supposedly progressive sociopolitical norms and practices. Achieving even a modicum of harmony among the continent's distinct cultures, religions, and civilizations would be a tall order.

A strategy built on this foundation would help Russia become a major independent player vis-à-vis even bigger actors: China to the east, the EU to the west, and in the future, India to the south.

Expanding Relationships

For the foreseeable future, Russia's relationship with China is of greatest importance and also considerable concern, given China's huge and growing economic, demographic, and military weight and its steadily expanding geopolitical horizon. Wary of simply joining China's endeavors such as the B&R, Russia has been trying to harmonize its interests and objectives with China's. However, aligning language is much easier than crafting an effective strategy.

Moscow needs to persuade Beijing that China's interests would be best served if its strengths become embedded within collective continent-wide institutions, where others, including Russia, could wield some influence. One such institution is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and another more amorphous one is the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral initiative. In June 2017, India and Pakistan formally joined the SCO. Russia would also like to further enlarge the SCO to include Iran. While this expansion makes reaching consensus within the SCO more difficult, it serves a more important purpose in Moscow's mind: namely, organizing a continent-wide diplomatic platform and diluting China's superiority.

In a similar vein, having opted for harmonizing the EEU with the B&R, Moscow has suggested extending economic cooperation to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Although still at an early stage, this initiative clearly aims to offset China's $21.4 trillion economy with the combined $7.4 trillion economy of ASEAN. Within ASEAN, Moscow looks to Vietnam, its Soviet-era partner with a $600 billion economy, as a gateway to the region.

Russia's argument for embedding China's efforts in various continental arrangements could be that Beijing's solo effort would result in the rest of Asia hedging or balancing against China. It is not clear, however, whether the Chinese would be persuaded by such a path offered to them. Even if Beijing sees some value in continent-wide geopolitical constructs—such as the SCO and the RIC promoted by Russia and where China is the most powerful member—Moscow will find it increasingly harder to make those constructs work, given the conflicts of interest among the members. Including India and Pakistan in the SCO is a case in point: unless its members set realistic goals for the organization and start using it to manage some sort of international order in continental Asia, beginning with their own sometimes fraught relations, the SCO will become dysfunctional and its role will diminish even as it expands. The same applies to the RIC. This is a primary challenge for Moscow's grand Eurasia strategy.

Currently, Russia seems to have an acceptable formula for Sino-Russian relations: never against each other, but not always with each other. This formula successfully marries reassurance with flexibility and can be a model of sorts for new major power relations. Even if it does become a model, though, adopting that same formula for Sino-Indian relations would be difficult. Moscow would probably need to moderate rather than mediate relations between its two principal partners in Greater Eurasia.

Russia's own relations with India, long considered so problem-free as to be taken for granted in both Moscow and Delhi, are becoming more complex. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has become focused on growth and development, which has led to a broadening of its relations with the United States. Meanwhile Russia, increasingly preoccupied with security in Afghanistan and its impact on Central Asia, has reached out to Pakistan. These new elements require strengthening the foundation of Russo-Indian relations, which have rested too long on government-to-government agreements, with a heavy emphasis on arms trade.

Managing the situation in Afghanistan, where the United States and its allies have proven unable to provide stability despite their military presence and economic assistance over a decade and a half, will be a core security challenge for Russia. Moscow could address it by using its own national assets for direct engagement with Kabul, Islamabad, Tehran, and elsewhere; upgrading the Russia-led regional security arrangement, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan; and engaging SCO members in strategy discussions, which could help legitimize the institution.

Beyond the SCO, Russia will need to work hard to harmonize relations with its many partners in Asia and the Middle East—from Japan and South Korea to Vietnam and Indonesia to Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey. Russia's partnership with Japan is exceedingly important in view of attracting Japanese technology and investment, particularly for Russia's eastern provinces; as well as for contributing, in coordination with China, to defusing the situation on the Korean Peninsula, which would reduce the risk of war on the borders of Russia's Far East and bolster Moscow's role as a guardian of nonproliferation.

Russia's strategy toward the Middle East, including Turkey and Iran, should focus on countering any extremism that threatens Russia; enhancing commercial opportunities for Moscow; and maintaining contacts with all relevant players, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, to protect and promote Russian interests in the volatile region.

Rehabilitating Relationships

Within this broad continental vision, Russia's relations with Europe remain hugely important, despite the still widening gap between Russia and the EU. To Moscow, Western European countries remain a primary source of technology and investment, a major market, and a cultural magnet. Though not part of Europe—if that definition today means the EU—Russia remains European. Like the United States and post-Brexit UK, in some sense, Russia is a Europe outside of Europe—only an outgrowth of its eastern rather than western wing. However, unlike the United States and the UK, Russia is widely perceived in Europe as an adversary rather than an ally. Moscow's key post–Cold War relationship with Berlin is fundamentally broken over what the Germans regard as Russia's disruption of the European peace order. This relationship cannot be restored on the previous foundation of Russia's progressive rapprochement with the EU. For the near term, no solid basis for the Russo-German relationship exists or is even conceivable. This is a major issue that Moscow needs to address for its grand Eurasia strategy to ultimately be successful.

Russia's long-standing wish that Europe moves away from U.S. tutelage and becomes a global actor in its own right will not be realized in the foreseeable future. Even with the EU going through a series of internal crises, NATO is, if anything, becoming more coherent and has refocused on the threat that its members see coming from Russia. Unless circumstances change, a more united Europe would not become Russia's advocate in Washington. Since early 2017, European governments, including Germany's under Chancellor Angela Merkel, have taken a harsher tone toward Moscow than has President Donald Trump's administration.

Still, Russia's grand Eurasia strategy would not be complete without the eventual rehabilitation of relations with Europe. Moscow should look for points of conversion, particularly with Berlin and Paris, as well as Rome, Madrid, and Vienna. Russia's hope so far has been that eventually the economic interests of its Western neighbors will chip away at the common Western policy of isolating and punishing Russia for its actions in Ukraine. The threat of terrorism would be another factor favoring cooperation. So far, this hope has not been realized. Under the current trajectory, Russia will have to live with a Europe that looks at it with deep mistrust and pervasive suspicion. A modicum of trade and some sporadic contact is what is realistically achievable between Russia and the EU, especially if there is no improvement in Russo-German relations.

That Germany's attitude toward Russian actions in Ukraine was a surprise to Moscow reveals Russia's profound misunderstanding of present-day European polities. The Kremlin's search for a "true Europe," in the image of Charles de Gaulle or Willi Brandt, is doomed to end in failure. In the absence of the grand old men who cannot be revived and of a conservative, Russia-friendly Europe that never was, Moscow will have to deal mostly with European Atlanticists. Reaching out to narrow-minded nationalists or other opponents of the liberal order will not yield tangible results. Those Europeans who might turn to Moscow usually do so to gain something with Russia's help, rather than to help Russia.

Russians probably understand that no rapprochement with Europe can happen without some sort of a settlement of the Ukraine crisis. The solution, however, is a long way off. The 2015 Minsk agreement, negotiated with Merkel and France's then president François Hollande, was dead on arrival. It worked for the Kremlin, however, which was looking for a way to permanently block Ukraine's bid to join NATO. Putin had every reason to be satisfied with the outcome of the Minsk talks, which were held at the time when the Ukrainian forces in Donbass were being pressed hard by Russia-supported rebels.

Clearly, implementing Minsk would have led Ukrainian leaders to commit political suicide. It would be impossible for Ukrainian leadership—simultaneously egged-on and challenged by nationalists—to abandon the idea of acceding to the U.S.-led Atlantic alliance; transform a unitary Ukraine into a federation, some of

whose members might look to Russia; exonerate those whom Kiev called terrorists and welcome them all the way to the Verkhovna Rada (parliament); allow Donbass to become a focal point of opposition to the post-Maidan authorities; and finally, be responsible for pensions and other social transfers to Donbass with its population largely disloyal to Kiev.

Absent a political settlement, Donbass is likely to experience a protracted conflict, which remains frozen until the situation in Ukraine, Russia, or Europe materially changes. There is also no way for Russia to “return” Crimea to Ukraine: Moscow considers its status as part of the Russian Federation as final and justified by the will of the overwhelming majority of the local population. For the foreseeable future, Russo-Ukrainian relations will remain as hostile as any in Europe and a source of tension for the continent as a whole. Pragmatic management of the adversarial relationship between the two countries is the only sensible option.

Such management would need to include a stable ceasefire in Donbass, policed by the United Nations, and a reestablishment of economic and humanitarian ties between Donbass and Ukraine across the ceasefire lines. Normalizing economic, social, and political conditions in Donbass would need to be achieved with Russia’s strong support. Moscow’s own direct involvement in the security situation in the region, however, would have to be scaled down. Visible progress toward reducing violence in the area would help deescalate tensions on Russia’s borders. It would also strengthen the arguments in Europe in favor of restoring links with Russia, although most EU-imposed sanctions would continue for some time.

In the post-2014 environment, the Baltic states have not been targeted by Russia, despite all the their historically rooted fears. However, these fears have led NATO to deploy token forces to the region for reassurance. These moves have created small Western military bases as close to Russia’s borders and the former imperial capital St. Petersburg as never before since 1944, after the Soviet Union had defeated Finland and driven the Germans from the Baltic republics. In their present configuration, NATO forces in the Baltics do not pose a real threat to Russia, but they help create an image of an “enemy on the doorstep.” The West will have to carefully walk the line between reassuring allies and provoking the adversary. And Russia will have to build a credible defense posture while not pushing NATO toward a regional arms race.

Europe should be particularly concerned about the fate of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which bans all ballistic and ground-based air cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. The ongoing U.S.-Russia dispute about alleged treaty violations could lead to the treaty’s demise, followed by the cancelation of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and the formal end of half a century of arms control between Moscow and Washington. This would not serve Russia’s or the West’s security interests. A U.S.-Russia accord on resolving the INF dispute should be a top priority.

Given the environment, realistic scenarios for the future of European security include a continued standoff between Russia and the United States in Europe, linked to an estrangement between Russia and Europe. Breakthroughs toward a rapprochement are not likely at this time. There is precious little that Moscow’s grand Eurasia strategy can hope to achieve in Europe or in the United States beyond (1) dialogue at the top levels, including among the military commanders and chiefs; (2) a certain amount of trade, particularly between Russia and EU countries; and (3) largely unimpeded travel and information flows. This puts a premium on both sides to focus on measures that build confidence and prevent incidents that could lead to war.

Prospects

To eventually achieve a Greater Eurasia, Russia’s strategy needs to be realistic in the near term. A credible strategy would focus on developing a “model” major power relationship with China and crafting a continental arrangement among China, India, and Russia. It would aim to transform the SCO into a platform for continuous, continent-wide diplomacy and negotiations, as well as a consensus-building body and source of legitimacy for the region. It would seek to normalize relations with Japan and gradually defuse the tensions on the Korean Peninsula, in close cooperation with China. Finally, it would have to include an institution-building effort to prioritize the EEU, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the SCO, and the RIC. As for western Eurasia, essentially Europe, a combination of confidence building and conflict management could prepare the ground for improved relations with EU member states.

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Carnegie Moscow Center

16 Tverskaya Street, Bldg. 1
Moscow, 125009
Russia

Phone: +7 495 935-8904
Fax: +7 495 935-8906
Contact By Email

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